

Kiribati

I INTRODUCTION

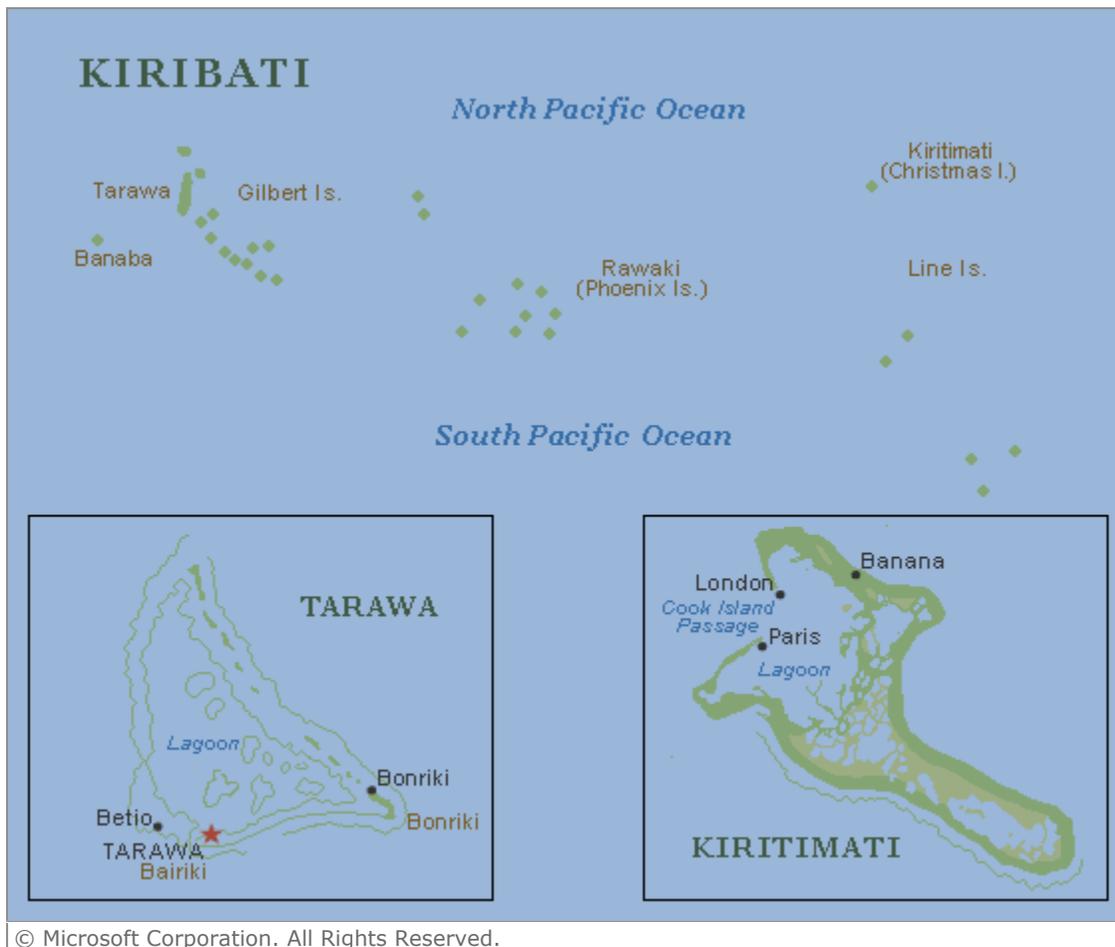
Kiribati, independent republic within the Commonwealth of Nations, located in the central Pacific Ocean, about 4,000 km (about 2,500 mi) southwest of Hawaii. It is part of the division of the Pacific islands that is known as Micronesia. Kiribati consists of 33 coral islands divided among three island groups: the Gilbert Islands, the Phoenix Islands, and the Line Islands. All of the islands are atolls (ring-shaped islands with central lagoons) except for the island of Banaba in the Gilbert Islands. Of the 33 islands of Kiribati, 21 are inhabited. Most of the population is concentrated in the Gilbert Islands. Only one of the Phoenix Islands and three of the Line Islands are permanently inhabited. The capital of Kiribati is Tarawa, an atoll in the Gilbert Islands. Bairiki, an islet of Tarawa, serves as an administrative center.



Kiribati Flag and Anthem

Between 1892 and 1900 the British government made the Gilbert Islands a British protectorate. In 1916 the islands gave up their nominal sovereignty and became part of the Gilbert and Ellice Islands colony. The Phoenix and Line islands eventually joined the colony, and the Ellice Islands (now Tuvalu) seceded. In 1979 the colony became the independent republic of Kiribati.

II LAND AND RESOURCES



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Detailed Map of Kiribati

Kiribati has a total land area of 811 sq km (313 sq mi). The islands extend about 3,900 km (about 2,400 mi) from east to west. From north to south they extend about 2,100 km (about 1,300 mi), straddling the equator. Kiritimati (also called Christmas Island), one of the Line Islands, occupies 609 sq km (235 sq mi) and has the largest land area of any atoll in the world. Kiribati's exclusive economic zone (area of the ocean in which it controls fishing and other rights) covers more than 3 million sq km (more than 1 million sq mi).

Kiribati's sandy infertile soils limit vegetation. Primary plant species include coconut palm, screw pine (*Pandanus*), and arrowroot. Rain collected in catchment systems is the primary source of fresh water. Marine life thrives in the waters surrounding Kiribati. The islands are home to numerous varieties of insects. Other animal life consists primarily of species introduced by humans.

Kiribati has a warm, humid climate, with average temperatures in the upper 20°C (lower 80°F). Annual rainfall, most of which falls between October and March, varies from about 3,050 mm (about 120 in) in the northern islands to one-third that amount or less in the southern islands. The southern islands experience frequent droughts. Kiribati lies outside of cyclone zones, and violent storms are infrequent.

With the exception of Banaba, a raised coral island with a maximum elevation of 81 m (266 ft), the islands of Kiribati are low-lying atolls that seldom rise more than 4 m (13 ft) above sea level. These atolls would be especially susceptible to flooding or even submersion if the ocean level were to rise. For this reason, Kiribati and other South Pacific nations have expressed concern about global warming, which could cause sea levels to rise.

Kiribati is almost entirely surrounded by coral reefs, an important tourism and fishing resource. Marine fishing has increased significantly since 1980, however, and the reefs have been damaged by the fishing industry. Access to safe water and sanitation is good in urban areas, where about one-third of the population resides. Drought is a persistent problem.

III THE PEOPLE OF KIRIBATI

The population of Kiribati was estimated at 94,149 in 2001, giving the country a population density of 116 persons per sq km (301 per sq mi). The overwhelming majority of the people are of Micronesian descent and are known as I-Kiribati. There are also very small minorities of Polynesians and non-Pacific Islanders. English is the official language of Kiribati, and many I-Kiribati speak it in addition to their native language, Gilbertese, an Austronesian language. Christianity predominates in Kiribati: about half of the population is Roman Catholic, and about 40 percent is Protestant. There are also small groups of Seventh-day Adventists, Baha'is, and Mormons.

About one-third of Kiribati's people live on Tarawa, especially in and around the administrative center of Bairiki. Others live in small rural villages scattered among the outer islands. Through resettlement programs designed to alleviate overcrowding on Tarawa, about 1,500 people were moved to the Teraina and Tabuaeran atolls in the Line Islands between 1988 and 1993. Another program of resettlement to the Phoenix Islands was initiated in 1995. Most of the former residents of Banaba were relocated to Rabi Island (part of Fiji) in the late 1940s due to environmental degradation resulting from phosphate mining on Banaba. Banabans living on Rabi are citizens of Fiji (an island nation officially named Fiji Islands), but they retain land rights on Banaba and they have a representative in the Kiribati legislature.



Caroline Penn/Corbis

Housing in Kiribati

Many people in Kiribati live in houses made from wood, bamboo, palm fronds, and other materials that can be found on the islands.

Education in Kiribati is free and compulsory between the ages of 6 and 15. The government operates primary and secondary schools, and churches run some secondary schools as well. Since 1973 Tarawa has had an extension of the University of the South Pacific. Other institutions of higher learning include the Tarawa Technical Institute, which offers technical and vocational courses; a maritime training school, which prepares students for careers at sea; and a teacher training college.

Most I-Kiribati live in extended families, especially in rural areas outside of Tarawa. People in these communities are involved primarily in subsistence activities and live in traditional houses made of local materials, such as wood and coconut leaves. In contrast, life in South Tarawa shows more Western influences. There, people tend to live in smaller kin groups, and modern forms of housing have become more common. The diet of urban dwellers is increasingly dependent upon imported foods. Most islanders wear casual, Western-style clothing. Men typically wear shorts and T-shirts, while women often wear loose dresses. Social life in Kiribati is centered largely around the church. Popular recreational activities include martial arts, soccer, volleyball, and canoe racing.

IV ECONOMY

The economy of Kiribati is based mainly on subsistence activities. The gross domestic product (GDP) was \$48 million in 1999, or \$550 per person. In 1986 the United Nations classified Kiribati as one of the world's least developed countries.

The majority of Kiribati's workforce is engaged in subsistence agriculture and fishing. In addition to the prevalent coconut and other palm products, agricultural crops include bananas, breadfruit, papayas, taro, and some citrus fruits. Because the northern Gilbert Islands receive more rainfall, they support the greatest variety of crops. Pigs and chickens are also raised in Kiribati, primarily for local consumption. Fish and other seafood are abundant in the waters surrounding the islands. In the early 1990s about one-third of Kiribati's workforce was employed as wage earners. The government is the largest employer, and most jobs are on Tarawa. Other workers are employed on overseas ships or work in the phosphate industry on nearby Nauru. Remittances from these overseas workers are vital to Kiribati's economy. The government also collects substantial revenues from the sale of licenses to foreign fishing vessels.

During the period when Kiribati was controlled by the British government (1892-1979), phosphate mining on Banaba was the primary source of revenue for the islands. Deposits were quickly depleted, however, and mining operations ceased in 1979. Kiribati has maintained a trust fund established with revenues from phosphate mining, which is used to help offset government expenditures. However, with the loss of the phosphate industry, Kiribati has remained heavily dependent on economic aid, mainly from Japan, the European Union (EU), and Australia.

Kiribati's only major exports are copra (dried coconut meat), cultivated seaweed, and fish. The United States, Australia, and New Zealand are the leading purchasers of the country's exports. Despite the cultivation of crops for local consumption, Kiribati is heavily dependent upon imported foods. Other imports include machinery and equipment, manufactured goods, and imported fossil fuels, which supply most of the country's energy. Australia, the Fiji Islands, Japan, New Zealand, and the United States are the chief suppliers of imports. The value of imports to Kiribati far outweighs the value of its exports. The country's official currency is the *Australian dollar* (1.55 Australian dollars equal U.S.\$1; 1999).

Kiribati's international airport is on Tarawa. Air Tungaru, which is Kiribati's national airline, and Air Nauru, the airline of the Marshall Islands, connect Kiribati with Fiji, the Marshall Islands, and Hawaii. All of the Gilbert Islands have airstrips for small planes, as do many of the inhabited atolls. Kiribati's main port is located at Betio, an islet of Tarawa. Banaba and Kiritimati also have significant ports. The Pacific Forum Line provides international shipping services, while Kiribati Shipping Corporation services the outer islands. Paved roads and bridges connect the main islets of Tarawa. Outside of Tarawa, many of the larger islands have unpaved roads. People travel between islands by canoes and other boats. The government of Kiribati runs an AM radio station. It also publishes a weekly newspaper, *Te Uekera*, which is written in Gilbertese; top news stories are also printed in English.

V GOVERNMENT

The government of Kiribati is modeled on the British parliamentary system. The president, called the *Beretitenti*, is both chief of state and head of government. All Kiribati citizens age 18 and older are eligible to vote. Voters elect the president from a choice of three or four candidates, who are nominated by the legislature from among its members. The president, who may serve as many as three consecutive four-year terms, appoints the vice president and a cabinet of up to eight members from the legislature.

Kiribati has a 41-member unicameral (single-chamber) legislature called the Maneaba ni Maungatabu (House of Assembly). Thirty-nine of its members are chosen by popular vote and serve for four-year terms. The attorney general and a representative nominated to represent Banaban people living on the island of Rabi in Fiji are also members of the legislature.

The judicial system of Kiribati is modeled after the British legal system and consists of a high court, a court of appeal, and lower-level magistrate courts. The president appoints the chief justice of the high court with the advice of the cabinet. The chief justice then advises the president in appointing the other justices.

Permanently inhabited atolls have local governing councils, which are particularly important due to the remoteness of some of the islands from the country's capital. Council members are elected to three-year terms.

The government provides all basic social services for Kiribati residents, including health care. Hospital and medical services are concentrated on Tarawa. Small dispensaries and clinics serve the other inhabited islands.

Although Kiribati has many political groups, they lack the formal organization, platforms, and structure of organized political parties. Instead, they tend to function more as interest groups, concerned with a single or limited set of specific issues. Kiribati participates in many regional organizations, including the South Pacific Forum, which deals with foreign affairs and international trade, and the South Pacific Commission, which provides technical assistance to the islands. Kiribati is a member of the United Nations.

VI HISTORY



Katsumi Kasahara/AP/Wide World Photos

Dawn of 2000, Kiribati

Dancers on Millennium Island, Kiribati, raise their arms to welcome the first sunrise of the year 2000. Kiribati, a Pacific island nation, moved the International Date Line in 1995 to position the uninhabited Caroline Island (renamed Millennium Island in 1997) as the first to see the new year.

Archaeological evidence indicates that the islands now known as the Gilbert Islands were settled by Austronesian-speaking people long before the 1st century AD. Groups from Fiji and Tonga arrived about the 13th century and intermarried with the islands' inhabitants to form the Micronesian people known as the I-Kiribati.

In 1606 Spanish explorer Pedro Fernandez de Quiros sighted Butaritari, an atoll in the present-day Gilbert Islands. In 1788 British naval captains John Marshall and Thomas Gilbert, for whom the Gilbert Islands were later named, came upon several of the other islands while sailing from Australia to China. Between the 1820s and 1860s American and British whalers hunted sperm whales in the surrounding waters, and some deserted their ships to settle on the islands. These early residents began dealing coconut oil and then copra with European, Australian, and American trading ships.

American Protestant missionary Hiram Bingham arrived in 1857 and began spreading Christianity through the northern Gilbert Islands with the help of Hawaiian pastors. In 1870 the London Missionary Society placed Samoan pastors on several of the southern Gilbert Islands. Roman Catholic missionaries arrived in 1888. Over the following decades, Catholicism became the dominant religion of the northern Gilbert Islands, while some of the southern Gilberts remained Protestant.

In 1892 British captain E. H. M. Davis declared 16 of the Gilbert Islands and 9 of the Polynesian-inhabited Ellice Islands (now Tuvalu) to the south a British protectorate. After phosphate was discovered on Ocean Island (now Banaba) in 1900, the British placed this island under the protectorate's jurisdiction as well. In 1916 Britain formally annexed the area as the Gilbert and Ellice Islands Colony (GEIC). In the years that followed, several of the present-day Line Islands were added to the colony. Britain added the present-day Phoenix Islands to the GEIC in 1937. In 1939 the British agreed that Kanton and Enderbury—two Phoenix Islands strategically important to the United States—would be administered jointly by the United States and Britain.

Japan occupied the Gilbert Islands in 1942, during World War II (1939-1945). Most European residents evacuated the islands, and the colonial administration established temporary headquarters in Sydney, Australia, which it later moved to Fongafale (now in Tuvalu). In one of the major battles of the war in the Pacific, U.S. military forces invaded Tarawa and drove the Japanese off most of the islands in 1943. The Europeans returned, and colonial officials set up a new headquarters on Tarawa. The Japanese continued to hold Banaba until 1945. During their occupation, they deported most of Banaba's residents to Tarawa, the island of Nauru, the Millennium Islands, and the Marshall Islands. The Japanese massacred nearly all remaining Banabans before surrendering the island. After the war, the British resettled deported Banabans on the Fijian island of Rabi.

Movements towards self-government in the GEIC began in 1963, when island residents gained a political voice through a local council created to advise the colonial government. In 1967 an elected

house of representatives replaced this council, and in 1974 the House of Assembly was created. Because the Polynesian people of the Ellice Islands wanted to maintain cultural distinctiveness from the Micronesians of the Gilbert Islands, the Ellice Islands separated from the GEIC in 1975 and formed the nation of Tuvalu. In 1977 the colony achieved complete self-government, and in 1979 it declared formal independence under a new constitution. The new nation became a member of the Commonwealth of Nations and adopted the name Kiribati, a rendering of the word "Gilberts" in the Gilbertese language.

In September 1979 Kiribati signed a treaty of friendship with the United States in which the United States gave up its claims to Kanton and Enderbury islands; the two islands were formally ceded to Kiribati in 1983. In 1981 the Banabans won compensation from the British government for revenues from phosphate mining over the previous 50 years. In 1992 Kiribati's legislature approved a proposal to seek compensation from Japan for damage caused during World War II.

Contributed By:

[Robert C. Kiste](#)

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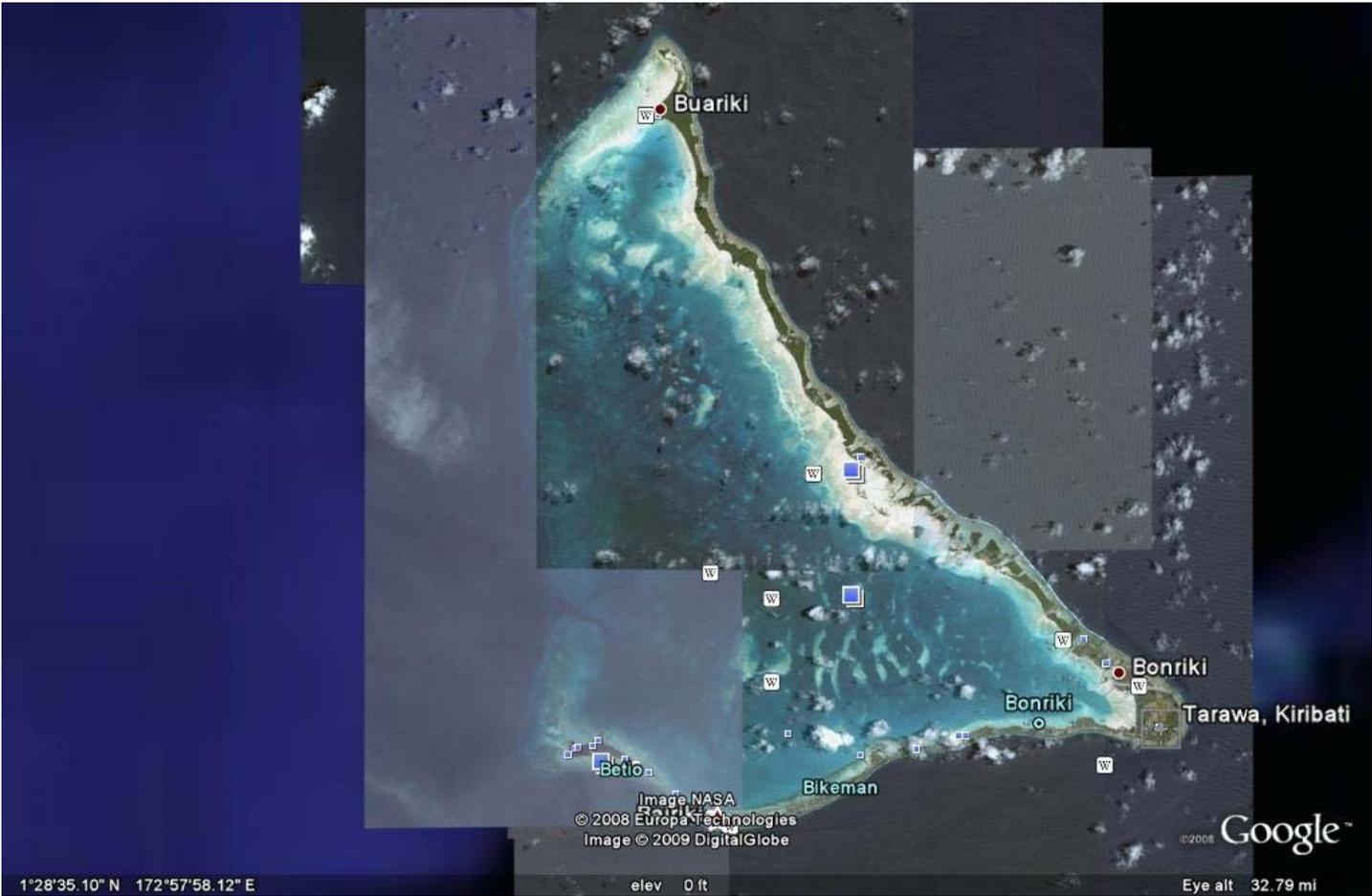
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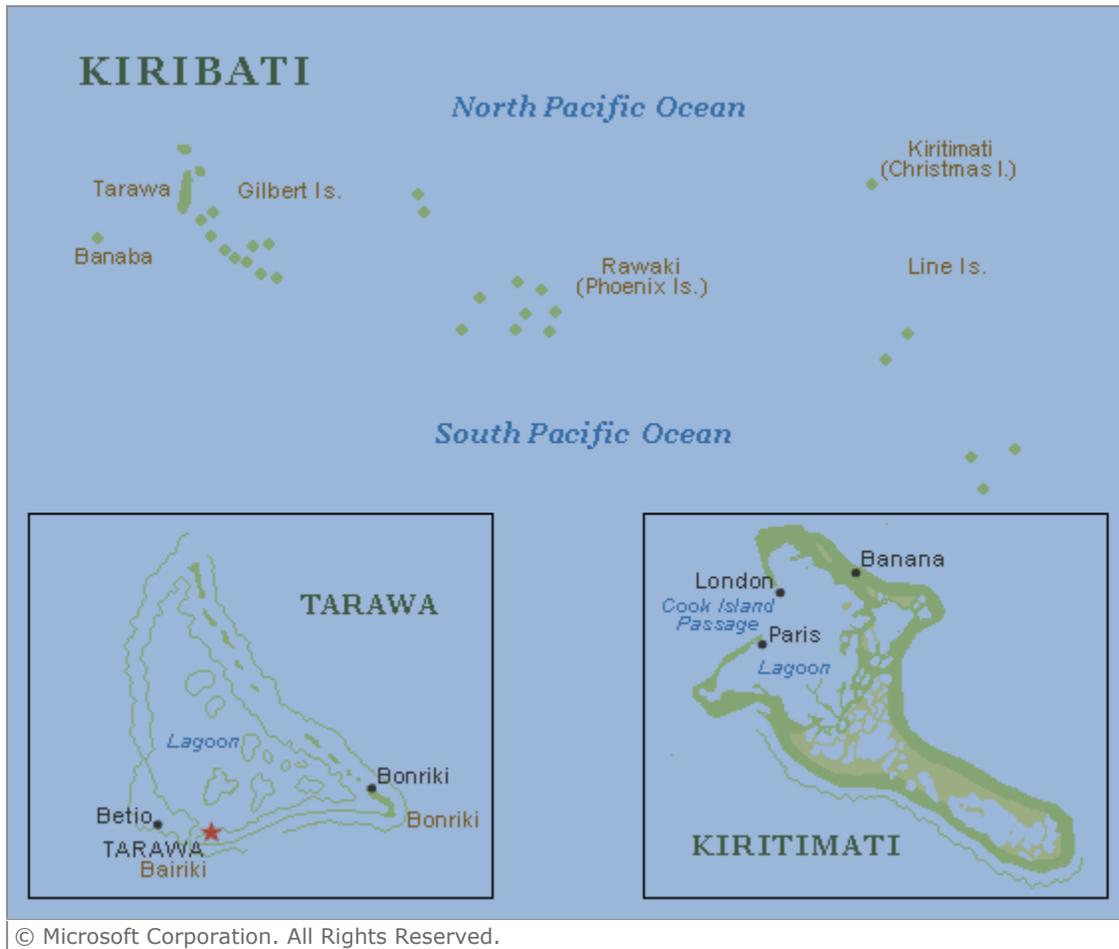
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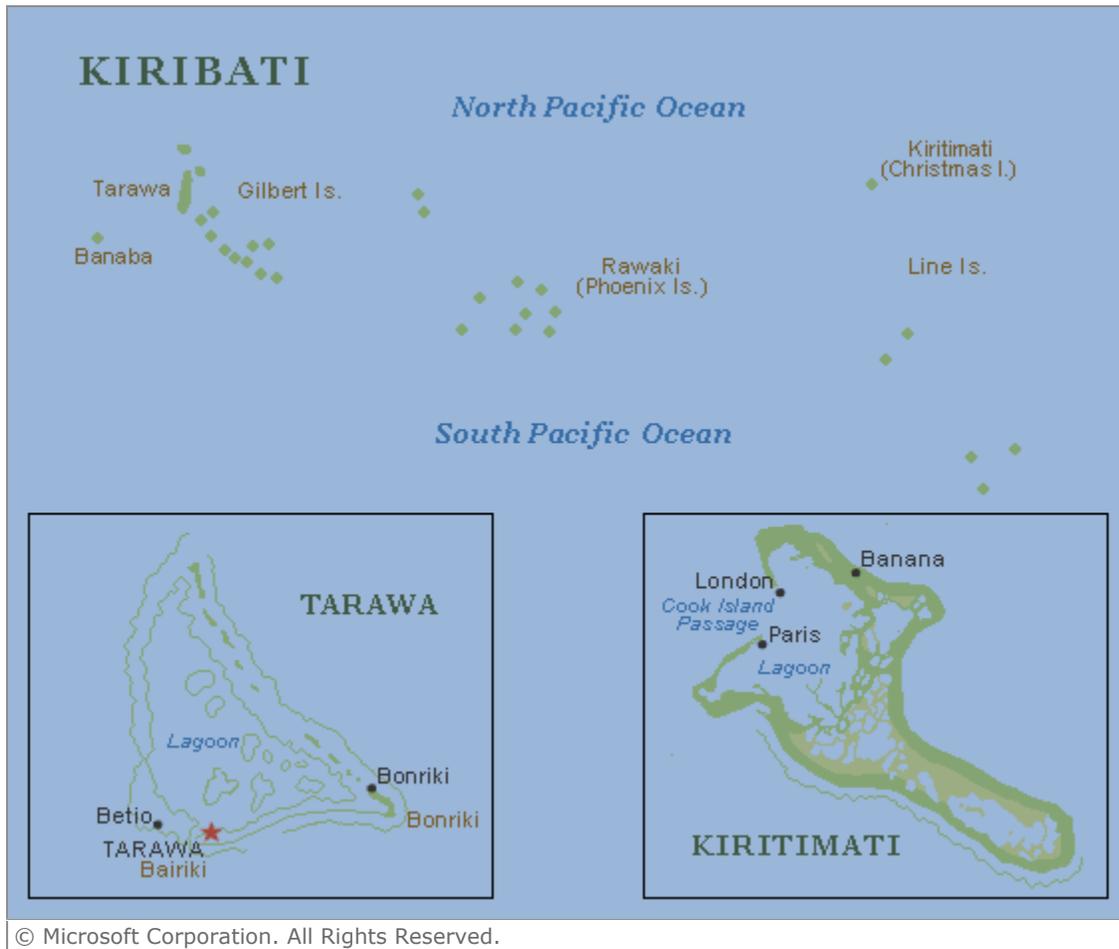
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Detailed Map of Kiribati

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West

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Kiribati

Average temperature, rainfall and snowfall information is available for the following climate stations in Kiribati

- [TARAWA](#)
- [CANTON ISLAND](#)
- [FANNING ISLAND](#)

Official name: Republic of Kiribati

Capital: Tarawa

Area: total: 811 sq km
note: includes three island groups - Gilbert Islands, Line Islands, Phoenix Islands
water: 0 sq km
land: 811 sq km

Climate: tropical; marine, hot and humid, moderated by trade winds

Location: Oceania, group of 33 coral atolls in the Pacific Ocean, straddling the equator; the capital Tarawa is about one-half of the way from Hawaii to Australia; note - on 1 January 1995, Kiribati proclaimed that all of its territory lies in the same time zone as its Gilbert Islands group (GMT +12) even though the Phoenix Islands and the Line Islands under its jurisdiction lie on the other side of the International Date Line

Geographic coordinates: 1 25 N, 173 00 E

Comparative Area: four times the size of Washington, DC

Land boundaries: 0 km

Coastline: 1,143 km

Terrain: mostly low-lying coral atolls surrounded by extensive reefs

Elevation extremes: lowest point: Pacific Ocean 0 m
highest point: unnamed location on Banaba 81 m

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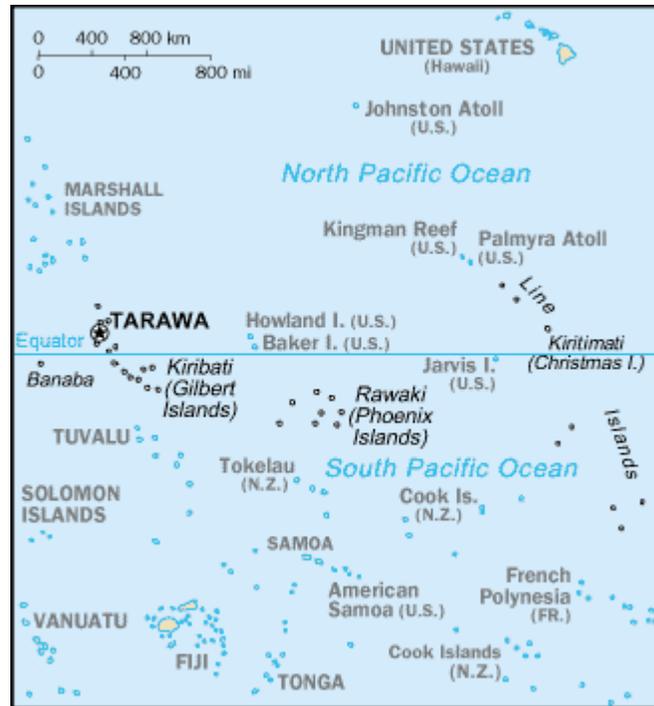
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Map of Kiribati



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General info

Entity:
Kiribati
Capital:
Tarawa
Population (2008-07-01):
110,356 (CIA)
Area:
811 sq.km.
Country code:
KI
Region:
Micronesia

Kiribati

Administrative units

administrative units	capital	area (sq.km.)	population 2000-11 census	population 2005 census
Gilbert Islands	Bairiki Islet	286	78,158	83,683
Abaiang	Tuarabu	18	5,794	5,502
Abemama	Kariatebike	27	3,142	3,404
Aranuka	Takaeang	12	966	1,158
Arorae	Roreti	9	1,225	1,256
Banaba	Anteeren	6	276	301
Beru	Taubukinberu	18	2,732	2,169
Butaritari	Butaritari	13	3,464	3,280
Kuria	Tabontebike	16	961	1,082
Maiana	Tebangetua	17	2,048	1,908
Makin	Makin	8	1,691	2,385
Marakei	Rawannawi	14	2,544	2,741
Nikunau	Rungata	19	1,733	1,912
Nonouti	Teuabu	20	3,176	3,179
Onotoa	Buariki	16	1,668	1,644
Tabiteuea North	Utiroa	26	3,365	3,600
Tabiteuea South	Buariki	12	1,217	1,298
Tamama	Bakaka	5	962	875
Tarawa North	Abaokoro	15	4,477	5,678
Tarawa South	Bairiki	16	36,717	40,311
Line & Phoenix Islands		525	6,336	8,850
Kanton	Kanton	29	61	41
Kiritimati (Christmas)	London		3,431	5,115
Tabuaeran (Fanning)	Paelau		1,757	2,539
Teraina (Washington)	Washington		1,087	1,155
total		811	84,494	92,533

source: [Kiribati Statistics](#).

note: 2005 census numbers are provisional results.

note: Line Islands are 496 sq.km.; Phoenix Islands are 29 sq.km.

note: Phoenix Islands: Birnie, Enderbury, Kanton, McKean, Manra, Nikumaroro, Orona, Rawaki.